

# From the Center to the Margins, (Re)Politicizing Intersectionality

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## Introduction

In this paper, I will reflect on the two-way journey that Intersectionality has taken from the margin to the center and from the center to the margin from a theoretical, methodological, and political perspective. I will start from the moment the term was coined in 1991 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and then trace the academic popularization of the concept following the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in South Africa in 2001 up to the present time. With this reflection, I intend to describe and analyze what has happened and intensified in the last decade, in which feminism as a political movement has become more widespread and, at the same time, has redefined the concept of what constitutes the “margin”.

## I. Genealogies of Intersectional Thought

For some years now, the term Intersectionality has come to designate a theoretical and methodological perspective that seeks to account for the intersecting or overlapping perception of power relations. This approach is not new within feminism, and in fact, there is now agreement that 1) feminist theories had addressed the problem before giving it a name and 2) that the problem of exclusions created by the use of theoretical frameworks that ignore the imbrication of power relations had been existing for a long time in diverse historical and geopolitical contexts.

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1 Translated from Spanish by Lívia de Souza Lima.

Black women in the United States challenged the nonrecognition of interlocking axes of oppression through organizations that fought for the abolition of slavery, the right to vote for Black people, and against the lynching of Black men and racial segregation. In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Combahee River Collective (1983, 1977), one of the most active groups of Black Feminism in the 1970s, authored a unique formulation of the problem of Intersectionality in their document *A Black Feminist Statement*. In this document, they define their political action around an active commitment to struggle “against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression” and to “develop an integrated analysis and practice based on the fact that the major systems of oppression are intertwined” (ibid: 15). This notion of ‘interlocking’ systems of oppression precedes Intersectionality.

Intersectionality matured as a concept at the end of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during a period of immense social change. It recalls the memory of anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia as well as anti-imperialist struggles in Latin America; those of the global women’s movement; and civil rights movements in multicultural democracies; the end of the Cold War; and the defeat of Apartheid in South Africa. In this context of change, it is worth highlighting the names of certain thinkers such as Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, or June Jordan, who spoke out against the hegemony of “White” feminism in the American academy. They demonstrated that the category of women and the political representation proposed by many feminist theories had been constituted based on the experience of women privileged for reasons of class, race, and sexuality. From this position of privilege, they often ignored the realities of women whose social situation was different, for these same reasons.

At the same time as this debate was going on in North America, Black women’s issues in Brazil were raised as topics of political debate within the Brazilian Communist Party (Barroso 1983) as early as the 1960s. Subsequently, in the 1980s, a Black women’s movement consolidated, affirming the intersection of race and gender as the center of its political program. Various activists and intellectuals (Thereza Santos, Lélia Gonzalez, Maria Beatriz do Nascimento, Luiza Bairros, Jurema Werneck, and Sueli Carneiro, among others) promoted the theory of the ‘race-class-gender’ triad of oppressions to articulate the differences between Brazilian women whom the dominant feminist discourse had sought to ignore. These authors were pioneers in pointing out that if feminism wanted to emancipate all women, it had to confront all forms of oppression and not only those based on gender. This is worth underlin-

ing because their contribution to the genealogy of Intersectionality is rarely acknowledged.

Together with Black feminists, Uruguayan and Caribbean women, these activists managed, not without difficulty, to raise the need to include the issue of racism in the feminist agenda at the Second Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meeting held in the city of Lima (Curiel 2007). In Lima, they also set up a regional coordination mechanism among them (Álvarez 1997). Finally, on 19 July 1992, 350 Black women from 32 countries gathered in the Dominican Republic, a country with a long tradition of feminism, to hold the First Meeting of Latin American and Caribbean Black Women. During this meeting, they discussed the agenda for the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in 1995. This meeting made it possible to highlight the ethnic-racial inequalities that characterized the region and the undervaluing of Black women's contributions to shaping Latin American societies. At the same time, it denounced the racist substratum of the new development models and structural adjustment policies and their negative impact on Black women's lives (Galván 1995).

These contributions affirm that, although this reflection is not new, what is unique about Intersectionality is how it has circulated in recent times in different academic and political contexts. It has become one of the critical approaches to contemporary discussions and struggles around “difference,” diversity, and plurality, with multiple effects, as we will see in the following.

## II. Intersectional Paths from the Margin to the Center

American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the concept of Intersectionality in 1989 as a tool designed to overcome the legal invisibility of the multiple dimensions of oppression experienced by Black women in the labor world. Intersectionality, she wrote, designates “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's labor experiences” (Crenshaw 1991: 1244). With this notion, Crenshaw hoped to highlight that Black women in the United States were exposed to violence and discrimination based on both race and gender. Above all, she sought to create concrete legal categories to address discrimination on multiple and varying levels. Referring to the court's rejection of a claim brought by five Black women workers that the General Motors seniority system discriminated against them, Crenshaw argued that the court's refusal to recognize “combined race and sex dis-

crimination” was based on the fact that the boundaries of sex and race discrimination were defined respectively by the experiences of White women and Black men (Crenshaw 1989: 143). The interplay of these boundaries obscured the specific subjective experience of Black women workers.

On numerous occasions, Kimberlé Crenshaw has made clear that her use of Intersectionality has been and continues to be contextual and practical. Her aim was never to create a general theory of oppression, but rather a concept that would allow for analyzing specific legal omissions and inequalities. As she explained:

Intersectionality, then, was my attempt to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what I thought they should – highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced so that the problems would be easier to discuss and understand (Crenshaw 2015).

A decade after coining the term, Kimberlé Crenshaw was involved in the preparation of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban in 2001. ‘Durban’ was a turning point in the understanding of the historical functioning of racism in the world and was characterized by the remarkable performance of women. Like the other UN conferences, Durban was also preceded by a series of preparations in different world regions. Their aim was to map the various forms of racism, identify the ethnic and racial groups most exposed to the effects of its manifestation, and propose actions to member states and UN international treaty bodies.

The Third Conference was a special moment of the growing prominence of Black women in the struggle against racism and racial discrimination, both nationally and internationally.

Among the different initiatives developed, the *Articulación de Organizaciones de Mujeres Negras Brasileñas Pro-Durban* (Articulation of Brazilian Black Women’s Organisations Pro-Durban) stands out. The debates, proposed by Black women on their specificities in the systems of production and reproduction, significantly heightened the visibility of problems of racially discriminated women. In this context, Crenshaw gave a seminar on the concept at the Geneva Preparatory Committee in 2000. She pointed out various ways to think about the racial aspects of gender discrimination without losing sight of the gender aspects of racial discrimination. In assessing the limited interpretations of the then-current human rights discourses, Crenshaw out-

lined a methodology for analyzing intersectional subordination to eliminate the cracks in these discourses through which the rights of women suffering multiple oppressions tend to fall and thus disappear (Bairros 2002). From this moment, the concept of Intersectionality began to be used in such contexts.

At the Durban World Conference, more than ten thousand delegates shared the complexity of their political challenges and life experiences. They adopted the term at the Non-Governmental Organization Forum of this First Conference. Since then, the intersectional perspective, whether under the name “Intersectionality” or other equivalent terms, began to take hold and expand globally (Dell Aquila 2021), as this definition is expressed in the Gender section of the document:

An intersectional approach to discrimination acknowledges that every person be it man or woman exists in a framework of multiple identities, with [sic.] factors such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, disability, citizenship, national identity, geo-political context, health, including HIV/AIDS status and any other status are all determinants in one’s experiences of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerances. An intersectional approach highlights the way in which there is a simultaneous interaction of discrimination as a result of multiple identities”.<sup>2</sup>

After the World Conference in Durban, Crenshaw’s work influenced the drafting of the equality clause in the South African Constitution, became institutionalized in international diplomacy, and gained academic popularity (Crenshaw 2012). Thus, the concept of Intersectionality, born out of a marginalized and contested context, gradually became a broad and widely used concept in these different arenas. In particular, it is worth noting that the UN uses this approach to refer to women’s rights as human rights and the diversity of women in very heterogeneous geographical, social, and cultural contexts, such as those of Latin America and the Caribbean.

It is also important to highlight that Intersectionality faced a similar development as the gender approach during the 1990s, the decade of the Great International Conferences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, the concept led governmental bodies to make more significant commitments to the fight

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2 UN WCAR (2001): WCAR NGO Forum Declaration, art. 119, October 26, 2022 (<https://www.hurights.or.jp/wcar/E/ngofinaldc.htm>).

against multiple discriminations, which has led to substantial advances in the formulation of public policies. Paradoxically, however, its institutionalization has also hollowed and neutralized the concept, often reducing it to a mere rhetorical term, used as a standard academic reference, decontextualized, and separated from its original political imprint. For if our use of Intersectionality leaves the feminist discourse intact, we misunderstand what it is all about. The same holds true if the argument, the analysis, and the intersectional approach consist of applying a new feminist truth “from above” to the understanding of the world of those “below” by pointing out that all inequalities are exacerbated by an additive logic (Espinosa 2020). Intersectionality, on the contrary, orients us towards a new form of interpretation that abandons the gender-centered feminist point of view for a more comprehensive one that seeks to think about and fight sexism, classism, and racism at the same time. The fallacy of the central critical systems of interpretation of the social order – Marxism, feminism, critical race theory – is that each has claimed to offer an understanding of the social world based on what they assume to be the primary axis of inequality from which all others are derived. Moreover, they think that each axis is autonomous, ignoring that their interrelation is constitutive in the configuration of inequalities.

Behind the academic category of Intersectionality lies a rich history of Black women’s activism across the globe, and the analytical and political scope of Intersectionality will depend on how the concept is used and for what purposes. On the other hand, the theoretical questions raised by the concept of gender – in the terms introduced by one of its earliest theorists, historian Joan Scott (2010), when she stresses that gender is only helpful as a question and, as such, can only be answered in specific contexts and through thorough research – are also valid for Intersectionality, as I will illustrate in the following.

### **III. The Uses of Intersectionality as an Analytical Category**

The appropriation of Intersectionality as a grid for reading social experiences in their web of multiple oppressions (not as an arithmetical sum) and from their own epistemologies has been slow. It has been challenging to accept that intersectional logic not only works in the daily lives of the people who are our subjects of study, but also in the power relations that are woven within the social and educational organizations that use this approach. Despite the good

intentions of those who make up the organizations, gender, class, and educational hierarchies are often perpetuated in these contexts.

Another persistent obstacle to radically embracing an intersectional, race-centered political-theoretical approach is the enduring Latin America narrative of *mestizaje* as the primary guarantor of the absence of racism. This powerful narrative of Latin American national identities, which describes these societies as fundamentally *mestizo* ['mixed'], has hindered the recognition of racism. Furthermore, those who claim that racism exists are subject to moral delegitimization as racists. In Latin America, racism is minimized, denied, or seen as anachronistic or “extraordinary”. It is so naturalized that it is mainly unconscious, to the point that the application of this concept is usually limited to practices occurring in other places and times: in the United States, in Nazi Germany, or South Africa, or our region, or earlier historical, colonial, or pre-revolutionary periods. Racism is only perceived as such in case of explicit or violent actions of racial discrimination (Viveros Vigoya 2007).

In this respect, it is very relevant to welcome Lélia Gonzalez's criticism of the founding narrative of Latin American societies that has prioritized Latinidad/Latinity, i.e. the link with Europe, silencing the importance of the historical existence and political agency (past, present, and future) of Black and indigenous peoples. Lélia Gonzalez (1984) named the territory in which we live *América Ladina* (Ladino América), realizing that this America has always been more Amerindian and African than “Latin”, and created the political-cultural concept of ‘amefricanidade’ as a counterpoint to the hegemonic US discourse on Black identity in the Americas.

It is also essential to recognize that most of the studies on Intersectionality that have been developed in the region have focused on the particular positions of those subjects who face forms of oppression and exclusion. In this sense, the privileged subject of analysis has been the oppressed subject, the excluded, the one on whom the logics of domination and inequality fall, and who embodies otherness. Many studies speak of triple and multiple oppression as additive forms of oppression, generating the idea that women are devoid of any possibility of agency and men are endowed with all powers. The problem with this view is that it ignores that women and men can simultaneously occupy different positions, some of the subordinate and some of the dominant ones. Moreover, the most “disadvantaged” position in classist, racist, and sexist societies such as ours is not necessarily that of a poor Black or indigenous woman, when compared, for example, to the situation of young men of the same ethnic and social group, who are more often exposed to certain forms of arbitrariness,

such as those associated with police controls. Analyzing particular social configurations can relativize common perceptions of how domination works.

Likewise, an arithmetical understanding of domination and its additive effects does not allow us to understand why, for example, a marriage act, as a status symbol, is not worth the same if it is performed in endogamous contexts in racial terms as if it is performed between interracial couples. In the Colombian case, my previous research has allowed me to identify, for example, that in the marital union between a Black man and a White woman, the White woman loses not only social status, but also prestige as a woman, as she is invested with sexual connotations that are undesirable in a woman of her ethnic-racial status. They also allowed me to understand that marriage, a patriarchal institution that should typically protect a woman against accusations of sexual promiscuity, lost its power when her spouse was racialized as a Black man. I also understood that the relations of gender, class, and race in which marital decisions were embedded could not be analyzed separately, but as simultaneous constructions, produced in a particular historical configuration that gives these relations their significance.

Similarly, my research on masculinities in Colombia has challenged homogenous views of masculinity in Colombia by showing that class and race distribute the rewards and costs associated with gender and race relations unequally, defining differentiated experiences and representations of men's masculinity. Thus, the men who benefit from patriarchal – and racial – dividends and those who suffer most from the costs of the imposition of hegemonic masculinity and White supremacist mandates are not the same. The former generally hold authority in the state and control coercive institutions and are recognized by the media. On the other side of the social spectrum, racialized and impoverished men hold the least skilled, lowest paid, and least recognized jobs and are among the groups most exposed to police control. The intertwining of classism and racism has shaped Latin American institutions from their inception in such a way that today, they show the same brutal face, that of police violence that rages against the bodies of young, racialized, and impoverished men. The connections between police violence, the continuous growth of the prison population, and a long history of humiliation, dehumanization, and terror inflicted on these bodies are undoubtedly some of the social issues that Intersectionality has made visible (Viveros 2018).

Migratory processes bring together different axes of inequalities, so they are also relevant for the theoretical and empirical analysis of Intersectionality. In international migration, the different classifications (gender, class, national

origin, race, ethnicity, age, migratory status, etc.) determine migrants' access to rights and opportunities and the situations of privilege or exclusion that derive from these classifications. The complexity and diversity of migrants' experiences depend primarily on the continuous interactions between different hierarchical structures of gender, ethnicity, class, and other axes of inequality at local, national, transnational, and global levels.

Among the Latin American works that have incorporated this perspective in their analyses, it is worth mentioning the pioneering work of Adriana Piscitelli, which focuses on the experiences of Brazilian migrants linked to the sex market. For this author, the experience of Brazilian migrant women (and women travelers) is affected by aspects that cannot be understood based on just one or two categories of differentiation, such as gender and nationality, but by the interweaving notions of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. The interaction between different axes of inequality is what explains why Brazil has been included in global sex tourism circuits, why Brazilian women have gained visibility in the sex industry in European countries, and why sexist and racist stereotypes about Brazilian women are activated whether or not the women are linked to the sex industry. The assumption that they have a naturally intense predisposition to have sex and a propensity for prostitution, combined with ambiguous notions about their styles of femininity, seen as submissive and simultaneously joyful, tends to affect these migrants indiscriminately in varying proportions according to migratory contexts, social class and, in some cases, skin color. For Piscitelli (2008), the cultural translation of Brazil's subordinate position in transnational relations is one of the main aspects affecting the experiences of these women since this translation is done based on the articulation between the different axes of inequality mentioned above.

Another work worth highlighting is María José Magliano (2015), who explores the labor trajectories of Peruvian migrant women in paid domestic employment in Argentina. Her work brings to the discussion the issue of segmentation and hierarchization of the labor market in ethnic-national and gender terms between native and migrant men and women and within these same groups. The research reconstructs the labor trajectories of Peruvian migrant women from an intersectional perspective that allows it to trace the differences in the labor and migratory experiences of these women based on their class affiliation (linked especially to the labor qualification and level of schooling attained), their migratory status, and their family dynamics. Adopting an intersectional perspective provides tools to understand a migrant and domestic

worker's different 'ways of being' according to the specificities of gender, social class, ethnonational origin, and migratory status. In other words, it produces a narrative that goes against the homogenous visions of migrants, showing that the intersections of these social relations configure different possibilities and modalities of labor insertion, vertical and horizontal mobilities, and differentiated access to rights as workers.

Recent research has used the potential of Intersectionality to analyze the effects of socio-political change on the everyday experience of the new indigenous middle classes in Bolivia. In this context of change, Shakow (2022) identifies the dilemmas posed by two competing narratives of social mobility for women who have experienced recent processes of upward social mobility. In the first – which exhorted young Bolivians to stop being indigenous “peasants” and become “professionals” or successful mestizo entrepreneurs – for a Chola, social progress meant getting rid of the pollera and braids, as it was impossible to dress and style one's hair in this way and pretend to have access to higher education. In the second model, promoted by Evo Morales' political project between 2005 and 2019, the emphasis was on changing values, focusing on the affirmation of indigenous cultural pride and women's right to professional and business achievements. This quest for greater equity included appointing ministers of Quechua and peasant origin in order to dissolve the supposed contradiction of claiming to be middle class and dressing as a Chola, affirming a political position instead. The conversion of the Chola into a gendered symbol of the imperatives of these two competing models of social mobility put them in particularly challenging and costly personal dilemmas between different political, community, and family commitments.

This example shows us that the interactions between gender, race, and class always operate in specific social, spatial, and temporal contexts. This way of understanding these relations allows us to escape from visions of femininity, indigeneity, and social ascent as something given, fixed, and immutable. Moreover, the relational foundations of Intersectionality show that the oppression of some groups is continuously interconnected with the opportunity and privilege of other social groups; privilege never exists out of context, but is directly linked to another group's disadvantage.

To conclude, I will no longer refer to the uses of Intersectionality as an analytical category, but to its political dimensions and what is at stake today, as the issue of feminism progressively shifts from its internal borders (the internal composition of the feminist movement) to its external borders and towards the alliances and solidarities that feminism must build with other social move-

ments that defend the interests of other socially minoritized groups (hooks 1984).

#### IV. Back to the Margins: Decolonizing the Uses of Intersectionality

The last decade in Latin America has seen numerous changes due to political shortcomings and a lack of autonomy of the multicultural state project that had been launched in the 1990s, the regression of social and political processes as well as gains achieved within its framework, and the exacerbation of social and racial inequalities as well as violence linked to the neoliberal project (Hale 2002). Among other things, the failure of the multicultural project stirred renewed public interest throughout Latin America in the issue of racism, with repercussions for the anti-racist work of many social movements, including feminism. In this new conjuncture, Latin American feminist ideas have become more clearly articulated in the critique of racism, not least because of the rapid circulation and growing acceptance of the intersectional perspective (Viveros 2016).

Indeed, in recent years, the socio-political context and some aspects of the dynamic nature of the notion of Intersectionality have brought about a certain re-politicization of the concept. Intersectionality has acquired new meanings. In a certain sense, it has even reinvented itself outside the perimeter of universities; it has done so in the streets and the struggles of social movements. In Argentina and Brazil, the notion of Intersectionality has been used to articulate and connect the movements of indigenous and Black women, rural and metropolitan communities, sexual minorities, and women living in slums without losing sight of their specificity (Mezzadra 2021).

In our Améfrica Ladina, a region characterized by multidimensional heterogeneity – and marked by long historical processes that have generated situations of social exclusion – intersectional political thinking and action has entered into a relationship with other disruptive political thought and action. This means that the use of Intersectionality has not been limited to observing and addressing the multiplicity and complexity of the discriminations that characterize the experience of Ladino-Amefrican women. Rather, it has sought to understand the historical roots to combat the root causes of these discriminations.

This appropriation and these uses of Intersectionality have prompted a re-politicization of the notion, where, to quote Angela Davis, the stakes

are “not so much the intersectionality of identities as the intersectionality of struggles” (Davis 2016: 144). Some works, such as that of Afro-Brazilian sociologists Flávia Rios, Olívia Perez and Arlene Ricoldi (2018), point to the emergence of a new generation of Brazilian activism, the bearer of a new language of contestation, which expresses more clearly the articulations between feminism and anti-racism in the public sphere with a view to problematizing the multiple forms of social oppression. Their adoption of Intersectionality as a language goes beyond their understanding of the relevance of this tool for social and political interpretation (Rios/Sotero 2019); the term has become a category of collective political identity, emerging in the context of the transformations of the public sphere and the dynamics of feminist and anti-racist movements, especially among feminists who question the limits of more traditional political activism.

In this sense, it is a different interpretation of the meaning of the term, not only as an analytical category but also as a category that marks the contemporary language of political mobilizations, the forms of naming, and the values that guide the collective actions of those who make the politics of the streets and networks. Thus, the term has ceased to be a noun to adjectivize a new type of feminist belonging and, above all, a new way of conceiving feminism itself. It is thus a reinvention of feminist thought and practice in new forms of solidarity where Intersectionality has become a kind of method to multiply encounters between different social movements and counteract any “hardening” of identity politics. While this has played an influential role in opening up new fields of struggle, it always risks becoming an obstacle to building a more effective basis for struggles against exploitation and oppression.

However, the reinvention of Intersectionality as an “intersectionality of struggles”, as Angela Davis has put it, seems to prefigure a new politics of solidarity. One that is not based on vague assumptions of sisterhood or images of complete identification of some women with others, but on political and ethical goals (Mohanty 2020). One that allows for the construction of imagined communities, not around sex or color as inherent or natural characteristics, but around ways of thinking about race, class, and gender.

This return to the margin of intersectional political thought and action means, to paraphrase bell hooks (1989: 23), choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. hooks draws a clear distinction between marginality imposed by oppressive structures and marginality selected as a place of resistance, as a place of radical openness and possibility. This place of resistance is a critical response to domination and a space forged through struggle. We

know that the struggle is difficult, challenging, and arduous. But we also know that struggle pleases, delights, and satisfies our desire. With bell hooks, we can imagine the space of intersectional struggles as a radical creative space that affirms and sustains our subjectivity and gives us a new place to articulate our sense of the world.

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